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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

GENERAL BOOKS AND BOOKS OF ANCIENT HISTORY

The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma. By HENRY ADAMS. With an Introduction by BROOKS ADAMS. (New York: Macmillan Company. 1919. Pp. xv, 317. \$2.50.)

THE reader will not find anything in this volume from the pen of Henry Adams bearing the title "The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma". He will find the brief letter to H. B. Adams, written in December, 1894, to serve in lieu of a presidential address before the American Historical Association, already published in the *Reports* of the Association; the *Letter to American Teachers of History*, privately printed in 1910; and an essay entitled "The Rule of Phase applied to History", now printed for the first time. These three papers, together making 186 pages, possess a certain unity, since they all deal with the conflict, serious and important as Adams thought, between the conclusions of science and the assumptions of historians in respect to the future of man and the world. To these three papers, the editor, Brooks Adams, has contributed an introduction of 125 pages, under the caption of "The Heritage of Henry Adams"; and to the entire volume he has given the title *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*.

The title seems ill suited to the papers that make the substance of the volume; but one gathers from the introduction why it was adopted. In the introduction the editor does not concern himself with a criticism of his brother's essays, which he has "long thought unanswerable"; he attempts rather to "tell the story of a movement in thought which has, for the last half century, been developing" in his family. This movement in thought starts with John Quincy Adams, whose life-work was founded on the belief in God and in democracy. To-day, whatever may have happened to the belief in God, the tendency is still "very strong throughout the world to deify the democratic dogma, and to look to democracy to accomplish pretty promptly some approach to a millennium among men". But in the Adams family the belief that democracy, with whatever aid from science, can bring in any millennium, has gradually vanished. How it weakened and disappeared is what Brooks Adams tells us in the introduction. Even John Quincy Adams, whose confidence in the value of science was conditioned on his belief in God, died "declaring that God had abandoned him". With God gone, Henry and Brooks, inheriting their grandfather's faith in science, at last came to realize that science taught that neither the world, nor "man as a part of the world, has been evolved in obedience to any single power which

might be called a unified creator". On the contrary, science teaches complexity rather than unity, and a degradation rather than a raising of vital energy. Hence, democracy must partake of the "complexity of its infinitely complex creator, and ultimately end in chaos". The degradation of the democratic dogma which is here in question is thus far from being a general movement of thought; it is a movement within the Adams family, exemplified chiefly in Brooks and Henry.

The three essays of Henry Adams, of which the introduction gives us the genesis, form a valuable supplement to the *Education of Henry Adams*, in so far as that book deals with his effort to formulate for himself an intelligible philosophy of history. The problem which confronted him is stated at length in the *Letter to American Teachers of History*. Science teaches that the universe, in its material and vital processes, is but the expression of an energy, force, will—call it what you like—which, in doing work, is always dissipated, and which must therefore, finally—in some millions of years—be altogether exhausted; the conclusion of which is that humanity is assured of an ever onward and downward movement toward the final equilibrium of death and extinction. Historians, on the other hand, like politicians, teach, or at least assume, an endless "progress" or "evolution" toward a more perfect, or at all events a better "fitted", society. According to Adams, this notion is an illusion; and he wished to impress upon historians the necessity of squaring their account with the conclusions of science. "If the entire universe, in every variety of active energy, organic and inorganic, human and divine, is to be treated as a clock-work that is running down, society can hardly go on ignoring the fact forever." He felt strongly, therefore, that historians should deal with their subject on the basis of assumptions, and by methods, that scientists could recognize as valid. The new essay on "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" is a tentative effort to suggest such assumptions and such methods, an attempt to treat the vital energies that find expression in European history in terms of the Rule of Phase as the physicists understand it.

No extended criticism of Henry Adams's proposed solution of this old riddle can be undertaken in a brief review; but it may be well to suggest that such a criticism would raise at least two questions. The first is this: How does it happen that a mind so critical of all religious and political dogmas could have accepted so readily, so naïvely, the dogmas of natural science? In the eighteenth century men confidently expected that science would reveal for them the secrets of the universe and read the riddle of human life. This was evidently still the hope of John Quincy Adams. At a later day men like Huxley once more proclaimed the scientific evangel. But in recent years professional scientists have generally been more and more disposed to leave sweeping generalizations to laymen. "Science", says Lloyd Morgan,¹ "deals ex-

¹ *The Interpretation of Nature*, p. 58.

clusively with changes of configuration, and traces the accelerations which are observed to occur, leaving to metaphysics to deal with the underlying agency, if it exist." The truth is that Henry Adams was by no means content with "science" as Lloyd Morgan defines it. True to his Puritan traditions, he was bound to seek and to find this "underlying agency"; and having lost the God of his fathers, he constructed a new one out of "lines of force". His quarrel with historians is that they will not bow down and worship this new God, not of science, but of Henry Adams.

And this leads to the second question: Are not historians, in their dealing with human activities, more "scientific" than they would be if they adopted the attitude of Henry Adams? It is a pure assumption on his part that historians teach, or assume, a philosophy of progress. So far as my experience goes, most of them neither teach nor assume such a philosophy. No doubt there are exceptions. Last spring, sitting in a committee appointed to formulate a new history curriculum for schools, I listened to a young man describing with great enthusiasm a proposed new course designed to show the onward and upward progress of democracy—up to and including May 30, 1919. While he was expounding, my eye fell upon the cover of the *Current History* for that very month, and there I read the following words: "Seething Caldron in Europe—Revolution—Civil War—Disorders—Anarchy!" I wondered if I was expected to teach the progress of democracy onward and upward to the Seething Caldron. I decided I wouldn't. On the other hand, when I am invited to "treat the history of modern Europe and America as a typical example of energies undergoing degradation with a headlong rapidity towards inevitable death", I equally decline to teach that. I am content to follow the more modest plan of Lloyd Morgan, to regard the history of modern Europe as a series of "changes in configuration", and to attempt to understand, not in terms of physics, but in terms of human needs, purposes, and acts, how these changes of configuration came about, leaving it to metaphysicians like Henry Adams to deal with the underlying agency, if it exist, and to determine, if they can, whether we are headed for the ash-heap or the millennium. The ash-heap, even on Henry Adams's calculation, is some millions of years distant; and there is good reason to think that the millennium, if that is to be our fate, is still sufficiently remote not to call for immediate preparation on our part. Whatever its ultimate end or its absolute value may be, and whether we know the ultimate end and the absolute value or whether we know them not, human life will remain essentially what it has been, and will have the same finite and human values and meaning. It is the function of history, as I understand it, to deal with this meaning and these values as they are revealed in the thought and acts of men.

CARL BECKER.